



Sam Patch, the Famous Jumper

Paul E. Johnson

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The true history of a legendary American folk hero

In the 1820s, a fellow named Sam Patch grew up in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, working there (when he wasn't drinking) as a mill hand for one of America's new textile companies. Sam made a name for himself one day by jumping seventy feet into the tumultuous waters below Pawtucket Falls. When in 1827 he repeated the stunt in Paterson, New Jersey, another mill town, an even larger audience gathered to cheer on the daredevil they would call the "Jersey Jumper." Inevitably, he went to Niagara Falls, where in 1829 he jumped not once but twice in front of thousands who had paid for a good view.

The distinguished social historian Paul E. Johnson gives this deceptively simple story all its deserved richness, revealing in its characters and social settings a virtual microcosm of Jacksonian America. He also relates the real jumper to the mythic Sam Patch who turned up as a daring moral hero in the works of Hawthorne and Melville, in London plays and pantomimes, and in the spotlight with Davy Crockett—a Sam Patch who became the namesake of Andrew Jackson's favorite horse.

In his shrewd and powerful analysis, Johnson casts new light on aspects of American society that we may have overlooked or underestimated. This is innovative American history at its best.

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